

doing that in the right way, but I also stand here with 35 other Senators saying that to do that and make another program that exists more insolvent is not acceptable. I oppose that. I hope that is not used to create a new entitlement.

Madam President, I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The clerk will call the roll.

The bill clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. NELSON of Nebraska. Madam President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Without objection, it is so ordered.

#### ORDER OF PROCEDURE

Mr. NELSON of Nebraska. Madam President, I also ask unanimous consent that the Republican time be preserved.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Without objection, it is so ordered.

Mr. NELSON of Nebraska. Madam President, I ask unanimous consent to have about 6 minutes to address the body on national defense.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Without objection, it is so ordered.

#### NATIONAL DEFENSE AUTHORIZATION ACT

Mr. NELSON of Nebraska. Madam President, I wish to begin my comments on this year's national defense authorization by first thanking all the members of the Personnel Subcommittee. And I particularly would like to thank the subcommittee's ranking member, Senator LINDSEY GRAHAM. He and I have worked together for several years on this subcommittee, changing the chairmanship back and forth, and I have always found our time on the subcommittee is decidedly non-partisan, bipartisan, regardless of who currently chairs it.

All the Members of the Personnel Subcommittee strive to do what is right by servicemembers and their families, and any disagreements we have are minimal, and are always focused on how best to serve those who serve us.

The annual National Defense Authorization Act is one of the most important pieces of legislation that Congress passes every year. It provides authority for everything the Department of Defense does, from the ships and planes it buys, to the pay and compensation of servicemembers, to retirement and disability benefits. So I look forward to this year, once again, passing a Defense Authorization Act for the 48th year in a row.

As in past years, the committee has focused heavily on personnel issues, including taking care of the families of

servicemembers. There is an old axiom in the military that you recruit the soldier but you retain the family. So providing support to those families is more important now than ever before. I am happy with the bill, and I recommend it to my fellow Senators. I wish to emphasize that the committee also voted this bill out of committee unanimously.

The bill before us authorizes \$135.6 billion for military personnel, including pay, allowances, bonuses, death benefits, and permanent change of station moves. The bill contains many important provisions that will improve the quality of life of our men and women in uniform and their families.

First and foremost, the bill would authorize a 3.4-percent pay raise, which is half a percent higher than the increase in the Employment Cost Index and the administration's request and reauthorizes over 25 types of bonuses and special pays aimed at encouraging enlistment and reenlistment.

The bill also addresses the administration's request to increase the permanent end strengths of all the services over last year's authorization. The bill authorizes fiscal year 2010 end strengths of 547,400 for the Army; 202,100 for the Marine Corps; 331,700 for the Air Force; and 328,800 for the Navy. The Active Duty end strength of every service will increase over last year's levels. Moreover, the bill authorizes additional Army Active Duty end strength in fiscal years 2011 and 2012, if needed.

The bill also authorizes pay for travel and transportation expenses for Reserve component members to go home when training has been suspended at their temporary duty station. Operation Airlift, as we call it, came to my attention when members of the 110th Medical Battalion, based in Lincoln, NE, were stranded at Fort Lewis, WA, when training was suspended and the base was shut down for the holidays. Military rules prohibited using military funds to pay for their travel back to Nebraska until training resumed. This measure addresses this problem which has occurred in many other States and to many other reservists and guardsmen and demands that the military commands appropriately plan and schedule training exercises.

The bill also supports the continued provision of world-class health care to our servicemembers and their families, authorizing \$27.9 billion for the Defense Health Program.

The bill authorizes TRICARE standard coverage for National Guard and Reserve retirees previously in an uncovered so-called gray area. The TRICARE gray area retiree measure ensures nearly 225,226 eligible retirees nationwide will have the opportunity to purchase coverage under the military's TRICARE health care program.

In support of our increasing number of wounded warriors, the bill authorizes special compensation for caregivers for the time and assistance they

provide to servicemembers with combat-related catastrophic injuries or illnesses requiring assistance in everyday living. Additional support is provided through this bill which authorizes travel and transportation allowances for nonmedical attendants of very seriously wounded, ill or injured servicemembers.

To ensure we continue to increase the care of our wounded warriors, this bill requires the establishment of a task force to assess the effectiveness of the policies and programs to assist and support the care, management, and transition of recovering wounded, ill, and injured servicemembers.

To help resolve the dire shortage of physicians needed to care for the mental health of combat proven servicemembers, the bill authorizes the service Secretaries to add up to 25 officers each year as students at accredited schools of psychology for training leading to the degree of doctor of psychology in clinical psychology. In an effort to ensure our servicemembers get the mental health care they need and to help overcome the stigma associated with seeking mental health care, the bill requires person-to-person mental health assessments at designated intervals for servicemembers deployed in connection with contingency operations.

The bill also requires initiatives to increase the number of military and civilian behavioral health personnel at the Department of Defense.

Continuing our efforts to support wounded warriors and their families, the bill requires the Secretary of Defense to undertake a comprehensive assessment of the impacts of military deployment on dependent children of servicemembers, and a review of the mental health care and counseling services available to military children.

Finally, the bill authorizes \$45 million in impact aid to local school districts, including \$5 million for educational services for severely disabled children, and \$10 million for districts experiencing rapid increases in the number of students due to rebasing, activation of new military units or base realignment and closure.

These are just some of the highlights. There were over 60 legislative provisions affecting personnel policy, pay, end strength, health care, and family support. It is paramount we take care of our servicemembers by ensuring their pay and compensation is what it should be, and needs to be, to sustain the All-Volunteer Force and enable them to fight and win the Nation's wars and to take care of them and their families when they return home injured and wounded.

So, again, I would like to thank Senator GRAHAM and all the members of the Personnel Subcommittee of the Armed Services Committee. I look forward to working with our colleagues to pass this extremely important legislation as we continue the process of authorization of the parent bill.